



Candidates in Crowded GOP Utah House Race Vow to Fight Feds for Control of Public Lands

Description

US : The race to replace retiring Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah) in the U.S. Senate pits prominent Utah party rivals against each other in a Senate primary while also setting the stage for a competitive GOP battle for an open U.S. House seat.

Like most Utah elections, both contests will essentially be determined in the June 25 Republican general primaries. There are nearly 1 million registered GOP voters in Utah; and fewer than 300,000 registered Democrats.

Mr. Romney was a former Massachusetts governor; he led the 2002 Salt Lake Organizing Committee for the Winter Olympics and was the 2012 Republican presidential nominee. He announced in September 2023 that he wouldn't seek a second Senate term.

Headlining the 11 GOP candidates campaigning for his seat are former Utah House Speaker Rep. Brad Wilson, Reagan/Bush administration attorney and former Federalist Society Director Brent Orrin Hatch, Riverton Mayor Trent Staggs, and U.S. Rep. John Curtis (R-Utah).

Mr. Curtis succeeded Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) in a 2017 special election before winning three House terms and opting to run for the Senate. There are 10 candidates vying in Congressional District 3's (CD 3) Republican primary for his seat.

Squaring off are state Sen. Mike Kennedy, a medical doctor and also an attorney; Roosevelt Mayor and oilfield company founder Rod Bird, Jr.; former state Rep. Chris Herrod, a three-time CD 3 candidate; Utah Young Republicans Chair Zac Wilson; Utah State Auditor John "Frugal" Dougall; and former Utah County Republican Party chair attorney Stewart Peay.

Public Lands for Public Benefit

Utah and neighboring Nevada share topographical features and population numbers. Both have four congressional districts, but GOP-dominant Utah and Democrat-led Nevada apportion them differently.

Three of Nevada's four congressional districts are concentrated around Las Vegas, where three-fourths of the state's population lives. Democrats occupy those seats. The rest of Nevada is one district long-held by Republicans.

Conversely, Utah's four congressional districts each incorporate a swath of the 70-mile Wasatch Front corridor anchored by Salt Lake City where three-fourths of its population lives, as well as vast stretches of sparsely populated desert.

Since 2014, Republicans have won 19 of 20 U.S. House races in Utah. The exception is Democrat Ben McAdams' defeat of Rep. Mia Love (R-Utah) in 2018's CD 4 election. Mr. McAdams served one stint before Rep. Burgess Owens (R-Utah) unseated him in 2020.

Utah and Nevada, along with fellow Western states, also share this common trait: vast swaths of the land viewable from any vista is federally managed by an acronym soup of agencies often unfamiliar to those east of the Mississippi but literally part of the western landscape.

Say BLM in the West, and few associate it with Black Lives Matter, but instead to the Bureau of Land Management, often described as the nation's largest landowner with few friends in Western legislatures.

Most certainly not in Utah, where state lawmakers for decades have challenged the federal administration of public lands, especially those rich in lumber, oil/gas, coal, and critical minerals.

Not surprisingly, CD 3 candidates seeking to succeed Mr. Curtis, who responded to The Epoch Times' queries, are uniformly in the Utah mold, vowing to lobby for greater state control of public lands.

All cited immigration, deficit-spending, and energy policy—inherently tied to public lands—as top issues.

“Sixty-six percent of our state is owned by the federal government. That's always a big issue,” said Mr. Herrod, who served in the Utah House 2007–12 and claims, “I reignited the lands issue when I was in the state legislature. I still believe those lands should be transferred to the state.”

This is Mr. Herrod's third attempt to win a CD 3 GOP primary. The real estate developer who, among other talents, is a former competitive fencer, fell short in 2017's special election for Mr. Chaffetz's vacant seat, and 2018's primary against Mr. Curtis.

A former American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) Utah leader, Mr. Herrod said President Biden's policies are similar to those of former Democrat President Barak Obama.

“When Obama got elected, he pulled 77 oil leases, and that had \$1 billion economic impact in Utah. Joe Biden has essentially done the same,” he said, pledging to represent the “multi-use individual,” not only ranchers, timber companies, and energy interests but also hunters, anglers, boaters, hikers, and those like himself who “enjoy riding my motorcycle on federal land.”

Locals Pay Price for Biden Policy

Mr. Bird is best known as RJ Bird in Roosevelt, a city of 6,700 in the Uintah Basin south of the Wyoming and west of the Colorado state lines where he’s served on the city council for 15 years and, since 2017, as mayor.

His experience as the owner of Paragon Oilfield Products, which he founded while in his 20s, sets him apart from rivals, he said.

“I’ve worked in the oil and gas industry for the last 22 years, but I’ve lived in, was born and raised in, the Uintah Basin, which has the largest oil and gas reserves in the state and, frankly, one of the top reserves in the nation,” Mr. Bird said. “We also have the largest mineral deposits in the state—coal, uranium.”

But not much is happening under Mr. Biden’s policies, and that is hurting his city and constituents, he said.

“This puts us in a very difficult situation when we make our livelihood off energy,” Mr. Bird said. “The minerals on federal lands are controlled by the federal government, and when the president comes in with executive orders to expand national monuments or restrict drilling and permitting, it really can be devastating to our economy.”

Reversing those policies is “one of the big issues, especially Biden’s energy policies,” he said, noting he’d also use his House seat to keep the federal government out of contentious Colorado River Compact deliberations.

“They’re trying to solve this issue between the states right now. They don’t want it to go to the federal government,” said Mr. Bird, who served on the Central Utah Water District board for eight years.

Utah and six other Colorado River Compact states “don’t want to be beholden to whatever the federal government’s decision would be. I’m watching that closely,” he said. “If they need help at a federal level, it would be good for me to be strategically placed to be able to help them.”

From the perspective of land and water management, “There’s nobody else in the race that understands those things like I do,” Mr. Bird said.

Utah Could Power Country

But no one in the GOP primary would be more effective in championing state rights than him, maintains Mr. Kennedy, who served six years in Utah's House and two terms in the state Senate.

Public lands and energy policy are "absolutely" top issues for any Utah lawmaker, he said.

"Joe Biden's terrible policies promote renewable energy in the form of solar, and wind, which are intermittent and unreliable," Mr. Kennedy said. "Utah coal is some of the cleanest in the world, and we've got vast supplies of it and we're shutting down plants using coal and natural gas, which is shocking. Energy independence is fundamental."

A physician who practices family medicine and earned a law degree to better comprehend Medicaid and medical liability issues, Mr. Kennedy said the nation has plenty of options to develop "reliable energy that's dispatchable, cheap, and clean."

"And these people, just for policy reasons, just for their ideologies," he continued, "just want to use solar and wind, which are components of our energy approach, but should not be the only thing we're doing. Nuclear too: Utah has uranium."

In fact, Mr. Kennedy said, when in Congress, he'll aggressively lobby "to build on these vast tracts of national land. We put the power plants on them and [generate] energy that can be dispatched all over the country."

Utah is ideally suited to be the nation's energy generator, he said.

"As a doctor, the way I think about that is the heart. We don't have hearts beating all over our body for energy. We have one heart in a centralized, safe location, the middle of the chest," Mr. Kennedy said. "We should do the same for our country."

"If we were to have nuclear energy plants that were spread around on these Bureau of Land Management lands, these vast tracts of federal land," the nation's energy source would be in "safe areas that are not earthquake-prone, and certainly tsunamis and hurricanes are not coming to damage plants in the Mountain West," he said.

Mr. Kennedy lost the 2018 Republican U.S. Senate primary to Mr. Romney despite defeating the former Massachusetts governor, newly arrived in Utah, in the state's GOP convention by 57 votes.

Most Utah Republicans wish they had that vote back, he said, but rather than challenge Mr. Curtis in the Senate primary, he's running for his open House seat.

“As a congressman, I’d be fighting to promote all that we could do to leverage ‘all of the above.’ I am a big ‘all of the above’ fan,” Mr. Kennedy said. “When it comes to Utah, we have coal, we have natural gas, we have oil, and, of course, we have solar and wind and we can do nuclear. We should be leveraging all of those.”

The veteran lawmaker notes he’s the only CD 3 candidate with recent legislative experience and that, as a family doctor, “no one in this race knows Medicare-Medicaid like I do” while also being a small business owner.

“I run my medical practice and understand what it’s like to make payroll. None of these [candidates] have taken hard votes recently, except me, and I’m a proven commodity for people willing to hire me. I’d love to go to Washington and fight for them,” Mr. Kennedy said.

Zac Wilson Is Not Zach Wilson

Mr. Wilson, 29, who works for a Salt Lake City private equity firm and leads Utah Young Republicans, doesn’t address public lands and energy policy, but both are incorporated within his “three-issue platform.”

“I’m looking to return the [federal] government’s focus to some of the basic stuff we should know and love—constitutional federalism, separation of powers,” he said. “We’re talking about free enterprise that makes America a really unique and wonderful place.

Mr. Wilson praised Utah’s other U.S. Senator, conservative Republican Mike Lee. “He’s spot-on with states’ rights. Every decision made at the national level actually makes us less strong” when it takes decisions away from locals who must live with those decisions.

“The border falls into that,” he said. “That’s one of the things the national government actually should be doing, and it isn’t.”

Mr. Wilson said both parties are “not messaging well with young people,” which presents an opportunity for the GOP.

“I actually think young people don’t really like, don’t really love, either party, but when they hear about free college and the climate agenda, they just naturally lean over to the Democratic party and its principles and liberal ideas,” he said. “But I think we’re engaging, being an optimistic voice in the next generation, reminding them of the idea of the American Dream.

“Actually,” Mr. Wilson continued, “I think the future of the country really hangs on whether or not we can get young people in the party.”

For those wondering, Zac Wilson is not Zach Wilson, the former BYU quarterback who plays for the New York Jets.

“We actually overlapped a couple years at college,” Mr. Wilson said, noting Zach Wilson is from Draper “which is smack dab in the heart of the Salt Lake County piece of CD 3” so, perhaps, name association

could benefit his campaign.

“Who knows?” Mr. Wilson laughed. “Anyway, I want to meet him someday and thank him for everything.”

By John Haughey

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